

Access, Retention, and Completion

FIPSE encourages educators at all institutions to propose new ways of ensuring access to postsecondary education. But access alone is not enough; the greatest benefits for both students and society depend on successful completion of academic programs. Improvements in rates of retention and program completion are therefore vitally important, especially for low-income and minority students whose success rates continue to lag behind those of other groups.

As the world economy becomes more competitive, increasing demand for a workforce that is capable of dealing with complex problems and sophisticated technologies, postsecondary education cannot be a luxury or a privilege. Rather, some form of it should now be seen as a necessity for nearly every student's future well-being. FIPSE therefore solicits proposals that recognize this need and pay particular attention to groups that historically have not had equal access to postsecondary education. FIPSE is eager to help support and disseminate imaginative access and retention strategies for these students, including projects at institutions that have long experience in serving underrepresented students, and projects to develop in faculty a special understanding of the challenges these students face.

The access and retention of students who are older, working, and caring for children also require special attention. Research studies confirm that involvement in campus communities strongly correlates with student retention and completion. But commuting and adult students, facing commitments away from the academic and social life of the campus, find it difficult or impossible to participate in traditional residential campus activities. FIPSE welcomes proposals to experiment with new ways of engaging nontraditional students in communities of learners.

As a majority of college entrants now begin at community colleges, it is crucial that educators focus their attention on these institutions, both as sources of quality liberal arts, technical and vocational programs that are ends in themselves and as gateways to further postsecondary education. This makes retention, completion, and transfer rates at community colleges especially significant. Consequently, FIPSE encourages proposals to improve community colleges' academic and career programs, counseling, articulation with four-year colleges, and support of candidates for transfer.

Many institutions have had success with distance education programs designed to improve access. As a result, students in nearly every region of the country now have additional, if limited, academic options. FIPSE invites proposals that promise to expand the range of academic choices available to distant students while preserving the academic quality and elements of

Brevard Community College Cocoa, Florida

"The Virtual Campus Project"

Brevard is a multi-campus college serving students in a large suburban area. As one response to changing student needs, demographics, and lifestyles, Brevard implemented the Virtual Campus project in 1995. The Virtual Campus is a computer-simulated, online campus environment in which students who were previously unable to commute to campus can access many aspects of a college education, including degree programs, student support services, and a variety of student activities. Faculty are collaborating with colleagues, administrators, and technical staff to design curricula, revise institutional policies, and develop innovative teaching techniques that optimize student learning. To assist other institutions that are, or plan to be, involved in online distance learning, Brevard's dissemination plan includes presentations at national education and distance learning conferences, online availability of project materials, and a satellite videoconference.

on-campus learning that have been tied so clearly to student success. We particularly encourage collaboration among institutions and systems in distance learning, with the expectation that economies of scale will make the necessary investments in technology, curriculum and materials development, and faculty training more cost-effective. We specifically invite institutions that are committed to distance education to propose innovative models to improve student support services, and to explore new ways to involve distant students in communities of learners.

Another problem of continuing concern to FIPSE is the limited participation of underrepresented groups in graduate study in the academic disciplines. Unless more members of these groups enroll in graduate programs and complete degrees, their current under-representation on college faculties can only continue, with negative impact on the performance and retention of all students. FIPSE welcomes proposals that promise to increase the access, retention, and completion rates of graduate students, as well as proposals to encourage those with graduate degrees to enter the postsecondary teaching profession.